

## Driven into Suicide by the Communist Regime of the German Democratic Republic? On the Persistence of a Distorted Perspective

### Abstract

*The assumption that the communist dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) drove many people into suicide has persisted for decades, and is still evident in academia and public discourse. High suicide rates in Eastern Germany that can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century cannot, however, be due to a particular political system. Be it monarchy, democracy, fascism or socialism, the frequency of suicide did not change significantly. In fact, the share of politically motivated suicides in the GDR amounts to only one to two per cent. Neither political, economic, cultural or macro-social factors had a significant impact on the suicide rate. This is further corroborated by an analysis of two sub-levels of the GDR society which were more likely to be affected by repression: prisons and the army. In both cases no higher suicide rate is verifiable. Complimentary to the quantitative approach 'from above', a qualitative analysis 'from below' underlines the limited importance of repression, and points to a regional pattern of behaviour linked to cultural influences and the role of religion, specifically protestantism. During the last decades, an overly politicised interpretation of suicide in the GDR has also overlooked the importance of the social microclimate with weak suicide-inhibiting factors in East Germany. The persistence of the misperception was facilitated by several factors: The bereaved ones in the East, the media in the West and a few victims of suicide themselves blamed the regime and downplayed individual and pathological aspects. Moreover, state and party officials in the GDR unintentionally reinforced the politicisation of suicide by imposing a taboo fuelling the flames of speculation.*

Myths stemming from political taboos can have a long-lasting legacy. The history of suicide in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) provides an excellent example. East Germany consistently had one of the world's highest suicide rates. 5 to 6000 people took their life every year amounting to a rate of 30 to 35 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants per annum. Compared to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the suicide rate was about 50 per cent higher throughout the GDR's existence from 1949-1990. Unusually high suicide rates were also registered in other socialist countries such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Therefore, some scholars attributed high suicide rates to the totalitarian atmosphere, namely political repression, surveillance, confinement and lack of freedom to travel.<sup>1</sup> One statistical survey appears to support the myth that suicide rates in communist countries are generally higher than in democratic countries.<sup>2</sup> One analyst even managed to identify specific links between high suicide rates and traits of totalitarianism.<sup>3</sup> But these findings cannot constitute more than a misleading hypothesis. Suicide is a complex phenomenon with psychological, social, political, economic, pathological, criminal, philosophic, religious and gender implications. Hence unicausal explanations should be taken with a generous pinch of salt.

The topic has not received much systematic attention. 27 years after German reunification there remains little knowledge of suicide under socialism, at least in the English-speaking world.<sup>4</sup> The works of German scholars such as Reinhard Cordes, Werner Felber, Hans Girod, Ehrhart Neubert have received minimal attention.<sup>5</sup> Mary Fulbrook is the only British historian who has delved into the problem so far. Her discussion of suicide in the GDR is, however, grounded on very few sources, and she arrives at a melange of shrewd observations and unsubstantiated speculations, which serve as little more than a starting point for further inquiries.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ehrhart Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR 1949-1989* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 1997), 282-284; Rolf Degen, "Ex-DDR: Hohe Selbstmordrate", *Psychologie heute* 18 (1991): 14f.; H. Hoffmeister, G. Wiesner, B. Junge and H. Kant, "Selbstmordsterblichkeit in der DDR und in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland", *Muenchener medizinische Wochenschrift* 132 (1990), 603-609; Georg Siegmund, "Die Selbstmordhaeufigkeit als Index fuer den Stand der seelischen Gesundheitslage", *Hippokrates* 32 (1961): 895-899.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Stack, "Culture and suicide: An analysis of 35 nations", *Paper read at the annual meetings of the American Association of Suicidology*, St. Louis, Apr. 1996, cited in Armin Schmidtke et al., "The impact of the reunification of Germany on the suicide rate", *Archives of Suicide Research* 5, no. 3 (1999), 233-239.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Stack, "Durkheim's theory of fatalistic suicide: A cross-national approach", *Journal of Social Psychology* 107 (1979): 161-168. This measure of political totalitarianism employs the total number of government sanctions enacted from 1948 to 1967.

<sup>4</sup> Two recently published books do not mention suicide: Paul Betts, Alon Confino and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss. The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York: Berghahn, 2011); Felix Robin Schulz, *Death in East Germany 1945-1990* (New York: Berghahn, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> One exception: Peter Grieder, "East German Totalitarianism. A Warning from History", in *Totalitarianism on Screen. The Art und Politics of The Lives of Others*, eds. Carl Eric Scott and F. Flagg Taylor IV (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky 2014), 203-228.

<sup>6</sup> Benita Blessing, "Review of Fulbrook, Mary, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to*

This article scrutinises the impact of politics on suicide rates, and identifies the main factors that hampered and still prevent a nuanced understanding of why suicide was more prevalent in the GDR than, for example, in the neighbouring FRG. The following argument is based on comprehensive discourse analysis and an examination of several thousand suicides that occurred during 40 years of the GDR's existence. Accordingly, suicide is both discussed as a statistical phenomenon at the macro level of society and as an individual event at the micro level. For this, a variety of sources are harnessed such as files from the police, the military and the Stasi, reports from education and health authorities, published and unpublished medical studies, interviews with experts and bereaved people, farewell letters and newspaper articles. The abundance of available quantitative and qualitative sources makes it possible to go beyond unsubstantiated claims and establish meaningful links between micro- and macro-history. Based on these insights, this essay explains the origins and persistence of the Western (mis)-perception of suicide in Eastern Germany.

### A Spectre is Haunting the West: Academic and Popular Perspectives

The assumption that political repression drove many East Germans to suicide haunted the West for decades. The spectre surfaced occasionally, temporarily became invisible then reared back time and again. In 1959 population scientist Roderich von Ungern-Sternberg claimed that 'more difficult living conditions' were the cause of the GDR's high suicide rate, without outlining any details.<sup>7</sup> In 1963, the West German news magazine 'Der Spiegel' placed particular blame on the regime for the high suicide rate of elderly people.<sup>8</sup> As the governing party of the GDR, the Socialist Unity Party (SED) had stopped the publication of suicide data in 1963, authors could only allude to the 'high but unknown' suicide rate of the GDR.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, during the following decades, several authors did not shy away from expressing strong views despite the lack of sound evidence. In 1977, for example, Konstantin Pritzel suggested that 'burdens bred by the communist rulers' coercive and terror measures' contributed to East Germany's high suicide rate. The author, a former member of the 'Untersuchungsausschuss Freiheitlicher Juristen' that was partly financed by the CIA, even

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Honecker", *H-German, H-Net Reviews* (June, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Roderich von Ungern-Sternberg, "Die Selbstmordhäufigkeit in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart", *Jahrbuecher fuer Nationaloekonomie und Statistik* 171 (1959), 187-207; 200.

<sup>8</sup> "Selbstmord. Krankheit zum Tode", *Der Spiegel* 17 (1963): 5 and 32.

<sup>9</sup> F. Unger, "Das Gesundheitswesen der DDR", *Deutschland Archiv* 3 (1970): 1141. Cf. Jonathan Steele, *Socialism with a German Face: The State that Came in from the Cold* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), 196.

distorted statistics to support his misleading claim.<sup>10</sup> Somewhat more cautiously, in 1986 a West German journalist asserted that ‘the totalitarian Marxism-Leninism, in connection with the tradition of Prussian statism’ could have generated ‘considerable suicidogenic factors’.<sup>11</sup> Scholars also continue to argue that political circumstances impacted the suicide rate in the GDR. In 1998, for instance, the sociologist of religion Ehrhart Neubert blamed the communist regime for suicides in his essay for the German edition of the ‘Black Book of Communism’. Neubert, a former member of the GDR opposition group ‘Democratic Awakening’, listed a number of suicides that he claimed were due to the political situation in the GDR and identified specific ‘suicidal structures’.<sup>12</sup> Ines Geipel and Joachim Walther followed this thread in their study of unofficial literature in the GDR by stressing the political maltreatment and downplaying the private suffering of the few authors who committed suicide.<sup>13</sup> A similar approach is evident in the writing of East German dissidents before 1989. The writer Juergen Fuchs, for instance, subtly alluded to the army’s responsibility for the prevalence of suicides among its recruits in his text ‘Das Fussballspiel’.<sup>14</sup> More generally, Hermann von Berg, author of an opposition manifesto published in 1978 asked: ‘Why does the German Democratic Republic have some of the highest rates of divorce, suicide and alcohol abuse?’<sup>15</sup> The politically motivated censorship used by the SED unintentionally fuelled such speculations about the apparently strong correlation between suicide and communist dictatorship.

These misleading academic and literary discourses were paralleled in a few films and television series. In 1966, for instance, the West German TV series ‘Die fünfte Kolonne’ featured the episode ‘Das verraeterische Licht’ in which a secretary commits suicide after being forced to spy for the Stasi. The secretary Beate Zoellner is employed by a Munich-based enterprise that carries out research for NATO. Her East German brother has helped a friend to escape from the GDR and is sentenced to ten years imprisonment. Exploiting his ill health, the Stasi approaches Miss Zoellner with the promise that her brother will be released if she takes pictures of secret documents. Due to some mishaps, the deal doesn’t work out. West German intelligence intervenes and discovers her guilt. Ashamed that she has deceived her

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<sup>10</sup> Konstantin Pritzel, “Der Selbstmord im sozialistischen Paradies”, *Berliner Aerzteblatt* 90 (1977): 1114.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Haller, ed., *Freiwillig sterben – freiwillig?* (Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1986), 32f.

<sup>12</sup> Ehrhart Neubert, “Politische Verbrechen in der DDR”, in *Das Schwarzbuch des Kommunismus* eds. Stéphane Courtois et al. (Muenchen: Piper, 1998), 859. Neubert’s view implied Galtung’s concept of structural violence, which has been criticised for its lack of differentiation and potentiality for confusion. Cf. C.A.J. Coady, *Morality and Political Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Mark Vorobej, “Structural Violence”, *Peace Research* 40 (2008).

<sup>13</sup> Ines Geipel, Joachim Walther, *Gesperrte Ablage* (Duesseldorf: Lilienfeld, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Juergen Fuchs, *Gedaechtnisprotokolle* (Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1977), 22.

<sup>15</sup> Manfred Wilke, “Wieslers Turn to Dissidence and the History behind the Film”, in *The Lives of Others and Contemporary German Film. A Companion*, ed. Paul Cooke (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 49.

boss, who trusted her unquestioningly, and scared by the prospect of being convicted, Miss Zoellner throws herself under a train. The episode's message is banal: The only reason for her desperate deed is blackmail by the Stasi.

Forty years later, the box-office hit 'The Lives of Others' revived and renewed the totalitarian framing of East Germany's suicide rates. It is worth examining closely how the movie presents suicide. 'The Lives of Others' features the suicide of theatre director Albert Jerska who hangs himself after being banned from his profession for years. Apparently, the vast majority of the film's audience considered suicide as a representation of suffering in a world deprived of artistic freedom. In an exemplary comment Mary-Elizabeth O'Brien commended the movie because it 'does not shy away from showing the cost in human lives for defying the SED dictatorship, especially in its depictions of suicides.'<sup>16</sup> However, it should be noted that Jerska belonged to the milieu of privileged state artists with a good chance of bypassing narrow-minded cultural policy. His occupational ban dates back to the time when dozens of prominent artists unsuccessfully petitioned against the denaturalisation of singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann in November 1976. Disappointed with the hard-line attitude of the SED, many artists left the GDR, or negotiated temporary exit visa. For Jerska these options don't seem to exist because he still feels strongly connected with the communist ideology and never envisages leaving the country he considers the better Germany. Reducing his suicide to political repression would disregard Jerska's other problems which the film also reveals. Jerska's friends offer him help but he refuses, presumably in a state of depression. His high consumption of alcohol might have further encouraged suicidal tendencies. The reality for most East German dissidents was different. Although many had to work in under-qualified jobs, when all other options were exhausted, they emigrated.

Nevertheless, it is possible that suicides inspired by opposition to the regime did occur in the GDR. The film becomes utterly misleading when, however, this individual case is linked with the suicide rate. Notably, the fictional playwright Georg Dreyman does not blame the regime directly for his friend's death in his eulogy. He accuses the GDR of coldheartedly ignoring people who commit suicide. It might be that 'Dreyman is drawn first to investigate and then to expose in the West the high incidence of suicide in East Germany' but to be precise, the film tells a somewhat different story.<sup>17</sup> There is no indication that Dreyman has access to suicide figures, which would have been unrealistic. Dreyman's embittered words of farewell

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<sup>16</sup> Mary-Elizabeth O'Brien, *Post-Wall German Cinema and National History. Utopianism and Dissent* (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2012), 158.

<sup>17</sup> Joye Weisel-Barth, "Voyeuristic Pleasures and Complexity Theory: The Lives of Others", *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology* 3 (2008): 115.

become source material for an essay that he manages to smuggle to West Berlin. Following its publication in the weekly journal 'Spiegel', it is West German TV news that connects East German suicide rate to recent suicides of artists. In doing so, the film unintentionally shows how individual despair in the East is transformed into a political accusation by Western media.

The film does contain hidden details that go against a too simplistic view. But the film as a whole conveys a fatalistic impression of life in the GDR. The totalitarian atmosphere of the film, the clear distinction of victims and perpetrators (with Wiesler the only exception) creates empathy with the victims and passes on an underlying message along the line of: 'Suicide is, of course, a metaphor for the tragic loss of vitality and life under totalitarianism; and underlying the film, heavy as a basso continuo, is this tragic sense of loss and waste—the repression, squandering, and death of talent, productivity, pleasure, and hope.'<sup>18</sup> Despite the abovementioned subtleties, the plot seems to suggest a link between political repression and suicide.<sup>19</sup> Apparently, the movie's emotional effects appear to have a stronger impact than authentic details. In a way, an underlying gravitational pull of this kind of reductionism is also characteristic of the discourse about East German suicides that has persisted for decades. Nevertheless, there were debates within academia about East German suicide rates that challenged the Cold War stereotype. East and West German medical statisticians and psychiatrists discussed the issue around 1961, the year when the Berlin Wall was built. In 1956, the GDR had begun publishing yearly suicide rates. In view of the high numbers, East and West German experts both employed Durkheim's theory of anomy to argue that social and political changes in East Germany might have increased the suicide rate.<sup>20</sup> But this claim was rapidly challenged. The territory occupied by the GDR, it was noted, had a long history of high suicide rates. Reinhard Cordes and others provided convincing evidence that the GDR had inherited regions with higher-than-average suicide rates.

Since the beginning of statistical surveys in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ratio of suicide rates in those areas which later constituted the GDR and the FRG respectively was roughly three to two. Political factors are very unlikely to have had a significant impact considering the relative constancy of suicide rates under monarchy, democracy and dictatorship. Be it the German Empire, the Weimar Republic or the Third Reich, long-term regional differences determined

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<sup>18</sup> Weisel-Barth, *Voyeuristic Pleasures*, 115.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Nick Hodgkin, "Screening the Stasi": The Politics of Representation in Postunification Film, in *The GDR Remembered. Representations of the East German State since 1989*, eds. Nick Hodgkin, Caroline Pearce (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2011), 83.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. von Ungern-Sternberg, "Die Selbstmordhæufigkeit"; W. F. Winkler, "Ueber den Wandel in Hæufigkeit, Bedingungen und Beurteilung des Suicides in der Nachkriegszeit", *Der oeffentliche Gesundheitsdienst* 22, no. 4 (1960): 135-145.

the frequency of suicide as a matter of ‘longue duree’. In the 1960s, that insight did become accepted among experts in East and West to some extent.<sup>21</sup> This consensus had, however, minimal impact on the public. In West Germany, neither politicians nor journalists accepted the academic consensus. And in the GDR, the leadership of the SED was also sceptical. The politburo feared that high suicide rates would damage the international reputation of the GDR, a fear that was compounded by a slight increase in suicide rates in the 1960s, and classified statistics on suicide from 1963 onwards.<sup>22</sup> This reaction was typical. Nine years later, as a result of sudden rise in crime, the SED also stopped the publication of crime rates in the statistical yearbook.<sup>23</sup> Attempts by East German experts to convince party officials that ‘the high suicide rate is not connected with the building of socialism’ went unheeded. Psychiatrist Helmut F. Spaete vainly admonished the authorities that ‘we cannot settle the problem by locking away the documents’.<sup>24</sup> The ban on publication of suicide numbers was not lifted before 1990.

At the same time, research into the causes of suicide in the GDR was not entirely impossible. Scholars produced dozens of regional and sectoral studies. Nevertheless, the classification of epidemiological investigations thwarted an accumulation of knowledge and an open debate. Therefore it is hardly surprising that 30 years later, at the time of German reunification, the very same discussion began all over again. Medical scientists reiterated the assumption that factors such as stagnation and social isolation might have caused the higher suicide rate in East Germany.<sup>25</sup> Again, evidence-based research rejected these simplistic views.<sup>26</sup> Once again, however, just as in the 1960s, this discussion was confined to academic circles and had little impact on the public.

## Fact Check: Politically Motivated Suicides in the GDR

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Reinhard Cordes, Die Selbstmorde in der DDR im gesamtdeutschen und internationalen Vergleich, *Zeitschrift fuer aertzliche Fortbildung* 58 (1964): 985-992; Hans Harmsen, ed., *Sozialhygienische Analyse der unterschiedlichen Selbstmordverhaeltnisse unter besonderer Beruecksichtigung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, der “DDR” und West-Berlin* (Hamburg: Akademie für Staatsmedizin, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> There were two exceptions: After a delay, the GDR reported the suicide rates for 1968 and 1969 to the World Health Organisation. Cf. *Statistisches Jahrbuch fuer die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (1973): 34\*.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Johannes Raschka, “Fuer kleine Delikte ist kein Platz in der Kriminalitaetsstatistik”. *Zur Zahl der politischen Haeftlinge waehrend der Amtszeit Honeckers* (Dresden: Hannah-Arendt-Institut fuer Totalitarismusforschung, 1997), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv (hereafter BLHA), Rep. 401, BT/RdB Potsdam, No. 8072, 171 and 186.

<sup>25</sup> H. Hoffmeister et al., “Selbstmordsterblichkeit in der DDR und in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland”, *Muenchener medizinische Wochenschrift* 132 (1990): 609. Cf. Rolf Degen, “Ex-DDR: Hohe Selbstmordrate”, *Psychologie heute* 18 (1991): 14f.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. R. Wegener, “Suizidalitaet in Ost und West: Daten vorschnell interpretiert?”, *Muenchener medizinische Wochenschrift* 132 (1991): 21f.

Before dealing with the reasons that led to the persistence of a politicised framing of suicide rates and a disregard for long-term perspectives and multifacetedness, it is necessary to determine the actual impact of political factors on suicide in the GDR as precisely as possible. The institution responsible for all unnatural deaths with political implications was the Ministerium fuer Staatssicherheit (hereafter Stasi). During the 1960s, the ministry of state security established homicide squads in all districts of the GDR to investigate all deaths that had a possible political cause. These so called ‘Spezialkommissionen’ worked independently of the murder investigations carried out by the police.<sup>27</sup> In East Berlin, the Stasi investigated an average of 13 suicides per year. In other districts, the number was lower, between five and ten. This equals to a share of 1.4 to 2.5 per cent of all suicides which had a possible political cause. Even these secret investigations found the vast majority of suicides were motivated by private factors. Typically, functionaries committed suicide due to family problems or diseases.

Working in parallel to the ‘Spezialkommissionen’, ‘Hauptabteilung I’ of the Stasi investigated unnatural deaths in the army. Even if its final reports endeavoured to downplay the political factors, some files contain clear evidence of political conflicts. For example, a non-commissioned officer who served as a border guard shot himself in 1988 after having found out that his girlfriend intended to apply for an exit visa. This had evoked a serious conflict. He also wanted to apply to emigrate from the GDR but knew that his chances were slim due to his status as a person cleared for access to secret information.<sup>28</sup>

That example indicates that suspicions the Stasi might have concealed the political motivations that inspired some suicides are incorrect. The Stasi’s main task was to identify possible threats to the dictatorship, and so its officers were eager to detect even tiniest hints at oppositional thoughts or ideological conflicts. Another striking example is the suicide of a Polish student in the autumn of 1980 that was initially considered by the Stasi to be politically motivated on the slim grounds that it coincided with the rise of Polish opposition movement Solidarity (Solidarnosc), even though there was no specific evidence to support this assumption. In fact, the Stasi found out that the suicide was predominantly caused by emotional turmoil and jealousy after a disco.<sup>29</sup> As in this case, the Stasi often presumed that

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Egon Neubauer, *Probleme des operativen Zusammenwirkens der Spezialkommission der Linie IX des MfS mit den Militaerstaatsanwaelten, den Kommandeuren der NVA, den gerichtsmedizinischen Sachverstaendigen und den Morduntersuchungskommissionen der Abteilung Kriminalpolizei der BdVP waehrend der Aufklaerung und Untersuchung von operativ bedeutsamen unnatuerlichen Todesfaellen in Dienststellen der Nationalen Volksarmee*, Diplomarbeit (Potsdam, 1978), Bundesbehoerde fuer die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR (hereafter BStU), MfS, JHS 001, Nr. 228/78.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. BStU, MfS, HA I, Nr. 14957/3, 586-588.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. BStU, MfS, HA XX, Nr. 3700.



political factors had led to suicide before the examination debunked this suspicion. As they were top secret and only accessible by a handful of top functionaries, there was hardly any reason to manipulate entire case files.

While some conclusions and reports denied political motivations, various parts of the files—be it protocols of interrogations, informer reports, copies of documents, recorded phone calls, internal reports and action plans—make a critical reading and alternative conclusions possible. Moreover, the Stasi did not investigate all politically motivated suicides. The ‘Spezialkommissionen’ were mainly occupied with private tragedies of state officials. At the same time, they missed a number of suicides with political implications, which are recorded elsewhere. This was primarily due to the fact that the competence of the Stasi was defined by the political function of the victim, be it a state official or a supposed enemy of the state. In addition, the police did not call the Stasi in all cases with political motivations. For example, several cases of young men who committed suicide for fear of conscription were only reported in police files.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, samples from the districts of Dresden and Potsdam of suicide reports compiled by the criminal police contain very few politically motivated suicides. Adding up all cases suggests that politically motivated suicides barely exceeded one per cent of all suicides. This is supported by the unofficial estimate by East Berlin’s chief public prosecutor who registered ‘Staatsverdrossenheit’ (tiredness of the state) as a motivation in a mere 0.4 per cent of all suicides between 1975 and 1981.<sup>31</sup> Thus, explaining the high rate of suicides in the GDR as a result of political repression is implausible.

Likewise, the impact of historical *events* also needs careful scrutiny. Contrary to Mary Fulbrook’s statement that ‘suicide rates very clearly correlated with political events’ oscillations of the suicide rate can only rarely be attributed to historical incidents.<sup>32</sup> The failed 1953 uprising did not increase the suicide rate and the liberalisation of economic and youth policy after 1963 did not reduce the suicide rate. Fulbrook’s claim that the fall in the suicide rate around 1968 and 1989 can be explained by historical changes provides a particularly clear warning that changes in the suicide rate should be interpreted extremely cautiously. It is tempting to interpret the drop of the East German suicide rate around 1968 as a result of political disturbances, most notably the ‘Prague Spring’ and its suppression. But a closer look at the administration of death statistics reveals that the classification of suicides changed in

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv (hereafter BLHA), Rep. 471/15.2, BdVP Potsdam, Nr. 1272, 1285.

<sup>31</sup> Interview Prof. Hans Girod, 28 Jan. 2002.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State. East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2005), 107.

1967/68. This update caused uncertainty and under-reporting, partly due to a shortage of new printed forms.<sup>33</sup> And it might seem obvious to explain the decrease of the suicide rate in the second half of the 1980s as a result of the positive expectations aroused by the Gorbachev era. Statistical analysis has shown, however, that the drop was actually the result of a generational shift which gave the cohorts born after 1949 (with lower inclination to suicide than previous cohorts) more weight in the overall figure.<sup>34</sup> This example also reminds us that overall statistics are aggregated data. Big numbers can conceal hidden trends, for instance, a high suicide rate of a sub-group. One example is forced collectivisation in the spring of 1960. This encouraged dozens of farmers to take their own lives but these incidents were still too infrequent to cause a steep increase in the overall rate.<sup>35</sup>

Only in extreme situations did the coercive policies of the SED cause a statistically relevant number of additional suicides. Most notably, as Fulbrook rightly highlights, it was the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 which coincided with rising suicide rates. The increase in the average suicide rate from 28.8 (in the time period 1956 to 1960) to 31.6 (1961 to 1965) equals a ten per cent increase in the suicide rate after the Berlin Wall was constructed.

Moreover, there were more suicides in and around East Berlin, and among young people, reinforcing the assessment of observers that the closure of the border was experienced by many as a shock.<sup>36</sup> The subsequent months of harsh repression as well as the introduction of conscription no doubt exacerbated some suicidal impulses. However, West German perception of an 'epidemic' was exaggerated.<sup>37</sup> Even the ten per cent increase in the suicide rate cannot be attributed exclusively to the construction of the Berlin Wall. Other factors could have contributed, too, such as the rapidly aging population. As a result of nearly three million mostly young people escaping to the West, the percentage of pensioners in the GDR was significantly higher (18.6) compared to the FRG (14.3). Aging indirectly affects suicide rates as the likelihood of suicide increases with age.<sup>38</sup>

Apart from these exceptional situations, certain sub-milieus in the GDR have been linked to high suicide rates such as prisons. Ehrhart Neubert has, for example, claimed that there were

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Ivett Merkel, "Zur Epidemiologie der Suizide auf dem Gebiet der DDR und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von 1950 bis 1992" (Humboldt Univ. Berlin Ph.D. thesis, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> R.H. Dinkel, E. Goertler, "Die Suizidsterblichkeit der Geburtsjahrgaenge in beiden Teilen Deutschlands", *Sozial- und Praeventivmedizin* 39 (1994): 198-208.

<sup>35</sup> Udo Grashoff, "Suizidales Klima" während der Zwangskollektivierung im Frühjahr 1960, in *Klassenkampf gegen die Bauern. Die Zwangskollektivierung der ostdeutschen Landwirtschaft und ihre Folgen bis heute*, eds. Michael Beleites et al. (Berlin: Metropol, 2010), 33-45.

<sup>36</sup> Dietfried Mueller-Hegemann, *Die Berliner Mauer-Krankheit* (Herford: Nicolai, 1973).

<sup>37</sup> Martin Pfeideler, "Tragoedien im geteilten Berlin – Hoffnung fuer Alte und Kranke – Keine Hoffnung fuer Liebende", *Deutsche Fragen* 9, no. 1 (1963): 18f.

<sup>38</sup> G. Wiesner, W. Casper, K.E. Bergmann, "Alterssuizidalitaet in West und Ost: Trend der Suizidmortalitaet 1961-1989", *Bundesgesundheitsblatt* 35, no. 9 (1992): 442-447.

remarkably high numbers of suicides in East German jails. Unfortunately, he uses absolute numbers not suitable for any conclusion at all; only relative numbers allow comparisons. In the case of prisons, a calculation of the suicide rate reveals that Neubert's claims are inaccurate. Especially in the 1970s and 1980s, the suicide rate of prisoners was three to four times lower in the GDR than in the FRG. Apart from a poor handling of statistics, the flaw in Neubert's reasoning stems from his equation of political repression and suicide. A random sample of a Stasi prison where 20 per cent of prisoners showed suicidal tendencies but nobody took their own life underlines that complexity of the relationship between suicide and repression.<sup>39</sup> Whereas strict und inhumane measures in East German prisons made it almost impossible to take one's own life, the relative leniency of West German prisons facilitated the 'success' of acts of despair.

Moreover, in addition to the strict regime, there were social factors that prevented East German prisoners from suicide such as the collective accommodation in big cells and the duty to work. And there were statistical effects such as the faster handling of criminal proceedings resulting in a smaller share of prisoners awaiting trial who were at the greatest risk of committing suicide. As for the 'political prisoners', the prospect of being released to the FRG helped many stay alive even in spite of the harsh conditions.<sup>40</sup>

Another example of a sub-milieu with supposedly high suicide rates was the army ('Nationale Volksarmee'). Here one could expect not only serious internal conflicts but also many self-inflicted fatalities due the availability of lethal weapons. However, the suicide rate of soldiers was no higher than the rate of the corresponding male age group in civilian society. The reliability of internal military statistics gives even more justification to the conclusion that the army can't be accused of having driven young men to suicide. This applies to the border guard as well. Dietmar Schultke believed that soldiers stationed directly at the Iron Curtain were particularly prone to a terror of the Stasi. He does not, however, calculate the frequency of suicides, which leads him to produce misleading argumentation.<sup>41</sup> In fact, border guards did not commit suicide more frequently than in other units of the armed forces or East German civilians of the same age.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> BStU, MfS, BV Halle, Abt. XIV, Nr. 863.

<sup>40</sup> See for example Ellen Thiemann, Protokoll der 69. Sitzung, in Deutscher Bundestag, ed., *Materialien der Enquete-Kommission „Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland“* (12. Wahlperiode des Deutschen Bundestages), Vol. VII/1 (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1995), 364.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Dietmar Schultke, "Das Grenzregime der DDR. Innenansichten der siebziger und achtziger Jahre", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B 50/97 (1997): 43-53.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Udo Grashoff, "In einem Anfall von Depression..." *Selbsttoetungen in der DDR* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2006), 99.

Several factors help explain this surprising outcome. Soldiers who had attempted suicide were not allowed to serve at the border. Stasi staff—rather than causing suicides—endeavoured to identify suicidal soldiers in order to send them to other units. In August 1976, for instance, an informant reported that a drunken border guard had attempted suicide and had to be restrained by comrades. The soldier was under surveillance as he wanted to break off from the SED and had expressed sympathy with his brother, who had been sentenced for ‘slander of the state’. As a result of the Stasi report to the regimental commander, the soldier was deemed unreliable and reposted away from the border.<sup>43</sup>

It is also recognized that a psychopathological disposition, often stemming from mental stress in early childhood, is a more grave suicidogenic factor than a temporary life crisis and acute internal conflict. This is not to deny the restrictions on personal freedom, pressure for conformity and repression that were all evident in the GDR’s armed forces but, apparently, obedience was only rarely so brutally enforced that it raised the question of life and death. This may also help explain the negligible correlation between political repression and the overall suicide rate of the GDR.

If not repression, then what about the impact of social factors caused by the regime such as poor living conditions and the shortage economy? Some scholars consider elderly people to have been victims of a society that lauded youth and neglected those no longer needed for work. The suicide rate of pensioners was in fact extraordinarily high.<sup>44</sup> Whereas the suicide rate of the whole GDR population was approximately 1.5 times higher than in the FRG, the suicide rate of East German pensioners was 2.15 times higher. The news magazine ‘Spiegel’ was not alone in blaming the SED regime for this discrepancy.<sup>45</sup> However, the matter was more complex as the example of Saxony shows. The suicide rate of women aged 60 to 80 in the Saxon regions of the GDR was almost double that of the former Kingdom of Saxony shortly after 1900. The suicide rate of the corresponding male age group, though, underwent a sharp decline from 163 to 78. As a result, the gender difference diminished and the overall suicide rate of elderly people in Saxony slightly decreased during the intervening eight decades.<sup>46</sup> Advantages such as the privilege to visit the Western hemisphere might have offset

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. BStU, MfS, HA I, Nr. 13723, 198-200.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. W. Felber et al., “Old-Age Suicide in 40 Years Former GDR”, in *Suicidal behaviour*, ed. Klaus Boehme (Regensburg: S. Roderer, 1993), 146-150.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. “Selbstmord. Krankheit zum Tode”, *Der Spiegel* 17 (1963): 5 and 32. A more recent example: Alexander Burdumy, “Reconsidering the Role of the Welfare State Within the German Democratic Republic’s Political System”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 4 (2013): 882.

<sup>46</sup> Sources: Oscar Kuerten, *Statistik des Selbstmords im Koenigreich Sachsen* (Ph.D. Leipzig, 1913); Statistisches Bundesamt ([www.gbe-bund.de](http://www.gbe-bund.de)).

disadvantages such as poor living conditions and inadequate health care, if these factors were relevant at all.

## Behaviour Patterns

After having exhausted the critical potential of quantitative methodology one might ask whether such a prosaic approach risks overlooking something important. Or, to put it differently: Is there perhaps a qualitative way to relate suicide to the political culture of the GDR? There were dozens of suicides caused by political and social factors to a large extent. A qualitative analysis of these cases can reveal some specific conflicts that existed only in communist regimes. For example, conflicts within the SED leadership caused suicides. In 1958, the central committee economics secretary Gerhart Ziller committed suicide after being accused of being involved in a conspiracy against the head of the SED Walter Ulbricht. In 1965, the head of the state planning commission Erich Apel shot himself dead on the day when a trade agreement with the Soviet Union he had opposed was ratified. Both suicides are indicative of the dictatorial climate within the SED. One should not forget, however, the role of personality. The sensitive and emotional Ziller did not 'fit the apparatchik mould', and Apel was 'an extremely ambitious man who found defeats difficult to bear'.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, a few managers can be considered victims of (internalised) pressures in the socialist economy. The SED certainly created a completely new political and social context, and suicidal behaviour was of course not just a continuation of a 19<sup>th</sup> century practice but influenced by the experience of 'real existing socialism'. Examples abound that mirror the specific context of the GDR. A few dissidents committed suicide as a result of blackmail by the Stasi. There were pupils who took to heart the exaggerated reactions of their teachers to their pranks, and their subsequent accusations of political provocation, with deadly consequences. If one does not neglect the influence of the personality, and if one is self-disciplined enough to withstand the temptation of drawing far-reaching conclusions, one can make valid points about the impact of the political system on one or another individual case.

Such incidents did not, however, increase the overall rate. Social conditions in the GDR may have caused some suicides but they also probably prevented others by, for example, providing social security. Most suicides which can be attributed to the political culture of the GDR had their equivalents in earlier democratic and monarchic societies in the territory occupied by the East German state. One can legitimately accuse the GDR of preserving the high frequency of

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<sup>47</sup> Peter Grieder, *The East German Leadership 1946-73. Conflict and Crisis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 135 and 165.

suicide, of providing a socialist facade for old conflicts, and of failing to establish a more humane society but the fact remains that the dictatorship did not consistently increase the total number of suicides.

A qualitative approach, however, provides some clues that point to a 'shame culture' as being the main cause of East Germany's high suicide rate.<sup>48</sup> The head of a collective farm hanged himself in 1968 because he felt responsible for not fulfilling the quota. A police officer in Leipzig took his life in 1974 after his wife threatened to inform the party about his love affair with another woman. And a party official in Magdeburg committed suicide in 1976 due to the shame he felt at his undignified behaviour during a drinking spree.<sup>49</sup> In all three cases there is little specific impact of the political system as such. But these cases can be associated with general patterns of behaviour, which might have increased the likelihood of suicide. Even if one does not buy the stereotype of the 'depressive-obsessive' character of the inhabitants of Saxony, the extraordinarily high suicide frequency in that Southern part of the GDR encourages a focus on specific behavioural patterns.<sup>50</sup> It is promising to consider unique aspects of national character, notably the prevailing concept of guilt as research in Scandinavia has demonstrated.<sup>51</sup> Particularly relevant to the GDR is the finding that high suicide rates in Denmark can be attributed to the frequent use of guilt arousal as a child-rearing practice.<sup>52</sup> Several scholars have concurred with the theory that a predominantly Protestant 'shame culture' in East Germany has led to more suicides than in West Germany's large Catholic regions which possessed a more cheerful and light-hearted mentality.<sup>53</sup> The more restrained attitudes of East Germans contributed to a more 'consensus-oriented conflict culture'. According to Bieri, suicide rates are higher in societies where aggressive behaviour is disapproved.<sup>54</sup>

The SED seems to have perpetuated this sense of duty and obedience to traditional moral norms, and in this regard the actions of the Communist party were not dissimilar to those of the Protestant Church. Indeed, circumstantial evidence suggests that religious norms as well

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Haller, *Freiwillig sterben*, 43.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. BStU, MfS, ZAIG, Nr. 1601; Staatsarchiv Leipzig, BdVP Leipzig, 24.1, Nr. 2353; BStU, MfS, BV Magdeburg, Abt. IX, Nr. 1259.

<sup>50</sup> Bernhard Honnigfort, "Die wenigsten Freitode gab es zur Wendezeit", *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 27 Sept. 1993.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Herbert Hendin, "Suicide: The psychosocial dimension", *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 8 (1978): 99-117.

<sup>52</sup> Jeanne Block, Bjorn Christiansen, A Test of Hendin's Hypotheses Relating Suicide in Scandinavia to Child-Rearing Orientations, *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 7 (1966): 267-288.

<sup>53</sup> See as examples Andreas Schulze, *Selbstmord und Selbstmordversuch in Leipzig. Zur Erkl  rung suizidaler Handlungen in der DDR* (Regensburg: S. Roderer, 1986); Steffen Heide/Erich Mueller, "Suizid – Sachsen bleibt seiner Tradition treu", poster, private archive Steffen Heide.

<sup>54</sup> Oliver Bieri, *Suizid und sozialer Wandel in der westlichen Gesellschaft* (Zuerich: Editions    la Carte, 2005), 183.

as divorce rates and other regional patterns of behaviour had the most significant long-term impact on the frequency of suicide.

Since the 19th century, Protestant regions have had higher suicide rates than Catholic parts of Germany. As the GDR predominantly inherited Protestant areas, denominational differences with the FRG, which possessed large Catholic regions such as the Rhineland, provide an explanation. One might question the applicability of religion to the atheistic GDR as the percentage of believers dropped from 91 to 30 during four decades of communist rule.<sup>55</sup> But despite the fact that denominational differences and their causes are disputed,<sup>56</sup> there were signs of a persistent influence of denominational attitudes to suicide in the GDR. Whereas suicide rates in Protestant regions remained high, Catholic regions, such as the Eichsfeld, still had a suicide rate that was 25 per cent lower than the rest of the GDR in the 1970s.<sup>57</sup>

One explanation for these denominational differences in the frequency of suicides is that the Catholic Church prevented suicides by providing the possibility of confession. That practice can help unburden a Catholics' conscience, whereas Protestants (and atheists) are supposedly left alone with feelings of guilt and responsibility. Another possible explanation is that the different denominations have very different attitudes towards suicide. Whereas the Catholic Church considered suicide a mortal sin until 1983, the Protestant Church developed a more empathetic attitude to suicide. This also explains the notable difference in the suicide rates of pensioners in East and West Germany. It can be assumed that the Christian faith particularly mattered for elderly people in the face of death. This is further corroborated by Schulz' findings that a substantial proportion of East Germans still preferred Christian funerals.<sup>58</sup> An additional factor—also linked to denomination to some extent—is divorce.<sup>59</sup> Saxony, East Germany's suicide hotspot, also had high divorce rates. In 1910, the divorce rate was three times higher than in mainly Catholic Westfalia, and 50 per cent higher than the average for the German Empire as a whole.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the divorce rate in the GDR was approximately 50 per cent higher than in the FRG.<sup>61</sup>

Apart from the abovementioned factors that contributed to higher suicide rates in East Germany, there are also grounds for assuming that the East-West difference was somewhat

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<sup>55</sup> Detlef Pollack, *Kirche in der Organisationsgesellschaft. Zum Wandel der gesellschaftlichen Lage der evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1994), 373.

<sup>56</sup> Steven Stack, "Religion and suicide: A reanalysis", *Social Psychiatry* 15 (1980): 65-70.

<sup>57</sup> Heinz Peter Arndt, "Suizide bei psychisch Kranken im Krankenhaus und nach ihrer Entlassung" (East-Berlin Ph.D. thesis, 1981), 62.

<sup>58</sup> Schulz, *Death in East Germany*, 186.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. David Childs, *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 267.

<sup>60</sup> Hans W. Gruhle, *Selbstmord* (Leipzig: Georg Thieme, 1940), 61.

<sup>61</sup> Bernhard Klose, *Ehescheidung und Ehescheidungsrecht in der DDR – ein ostdeutscher Sonderweg?* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1996), 289.

smaller than official figures indicate. The fact that several vague categories, such as ‘sudden death’ or ‘age and infirmity’, made up an extraordinarily high percentage of the causes of death in West German statistics gives cause for such a surmise. Moreover, the frequency of these dubious causes of death is most pronounced in the older age groups where the East-West-difference in the suicide rate was also most dramatic.<sup>62</sup> It should also be noted that the coincidence of statistical inaccuracy and denomination is no accident. Even if a case study in Catholic Aachen, which found that the actual number of suicides was twice as high as the official figures recorded, might be an extreme example, the extraordinarily high number of unrecorded suicides in Catholic regions is irrefutable.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the tendency to cover up the number of suicides in the FRG cannot provide a full explanation for the difference in the official suicide rates in East and West Germany as the East German professor of criminalistics Hans Girod erroneously suggested.<sup>64</sup>

To sum up, many political and social factors suggested by Western authors (most notably political repression and poor living conditions) can be ruled out to a large extent. Conversely, long-term differences regarding the concept of guilt, which refer to mentality and denomination, are worthy of consideration.

### The Persistence of a Misperception

Neither quantitative nor qualitative approaches support a strong correlation between dictatorship and suicide. Why, then, was there such a long-lasting misperception of suicide in the GDR? First of all, there is a long tradition of understanding suicide as a ‘sign of the times’. That tradition harks back to the beginnings of systematic statistical registration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>65</sup> Most notably, the sociologist Émile Durkheim conceptualised suicide as a symptom of destabilised social ties. His theory influenced subsequent generations of scholars, and also many publicists.<sup>66</sup> During the Weimar Republic, for instance, contemporaries quickly associated suicide with diverse factors such as national weakness, mass culture, authoritarian

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<sup>62</sup> Source: Statistisches Bundesamt ([www.gbe-bund.de](http://www.gbe-bund.de)); Cf. A. Schmidtke, B. Weinacker, “Suizidraten, Suizidmethoden und unklare Todesursachen alter Menschen”, *Zeitschrift fuer Gerontologie* 24 (1991): 3-11.

<sup>63</sup> Armin Schmidtke, “Probleme der zuverlaessigen Erfassung, Reliabilitaet und Validitaet von Suizid- und Suizidversuchsraeten als Indikatoren ‘psychischer Gesundheit’”, *Psycho* 17, no. 4 (1991): 237. Cf. Michael Zientek, “Suizide und Suizidversuche. Eine Untersuchung der Einflußgroessen und Erscheinungsformen im Gebiet der Stadt Aachen auf der Basis der Dokumentation des Notarztdienstes und weiterer Ermittlungen im Zeitraum vom 1. Januar 1978 bis 31. Dezember 1982” (Aachen Ph.D. thesis, 1985).

<sup>64</sup> Hans Girod, *Leichensache Kollbeck und andere Selbstmordfaelle aus der DDR* (Berlin: Das Neue Berlin, 2000), 23. The numbers he presents are incomplete.

<sup>65</sup> Moritz Foellmer, “Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin”, *Central European History* 42 (2009), 220.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1951). First French edition was published in 1897.



pedagogies or capitalist exploitation. Both left and right wing organisations exploited individual cases to berate the existing political and economic order.<sup>67</sup> To some extent, the debate on the GDR's suicide rate—although less intense—echoed this earlier discourse.<sup>68</sup> However, one should not overlook the differences between the discourse on suicide in the GDR and earlier periods of German history. The main focus of Cold War discourse lay on people driven into suicide by the dictatorship of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). This pattern of thought emphasized 'fatalistic' suicide (which occurs only in a footnote in Durkheim's study) in contrast to the prevalence of 'anomic' suicide in previous debates. From the scattered instances of suicide among dissidents, would-be émigrés or SED officials who had fallen out of favour, the Western discourse established a slim but influential connection between suicide rates and the GDR's totalitarianism.

It has to be admitted, first of all, that this politicised interpretation of East German suicides was not completely far-fetched. There were several tragic individual cases. No doubt, some can be considered as victims of repression. The suicide of Matthias Domaschk is a prominent example. The young dissident hanged himself in a Stasi prison after he was arbitrarily arrested, suffered two days of interrogations with blackmail and sleep deprivation, and signed a commitment to work as Stasi informant. This was not the only politically motivated suicide which became known in the West. In 1976, the Protestant clergyman Oskar Bruesewitz protested against the communist indoctrination of the youth by self-immolation. In the following year, Western media featured a Romeo and Juliet case. A couple committed suicide after the young man who had left the country was not allowed to return to the GDR to visit his girlfriend.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, the challenging economic situation in the GDR also created serious conflicts. For example, the manager of a sugar factory hurled himself off a silo in the autumn of 1978. He had done everything to better the poor performance of the factory but some organisational and technological problems proved to be unsolvable. Despite his efforts, the district council (Rat des Bezirkes) criticised him for the serious shortcomings in strong terms. The factory manager was a selfless, conscientious, modest but also optimistic and humorous person. Apart

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Ursula Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den guten Tod* (Köln: Böhlau, 2001); Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>68</sup> A scholar who mentioned the nexus of the GDR's high divorce rate, alcoholism and suicide rate is indicative of the long-lasting influence of Durkheim's concept of anomie. Roland Smith, "The Church in the German Democratic Republic", in *Honecker's Germany*, ed. David Childs (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 81.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Pritzel, *Selbstmord im sozialistischen Paradies*.

from his tendency to ask too much from himself, the police could not find any issues regarding his personality or mental health.<sup>70</sup>

The files of the education authorities also contain a number of suicides caused by political repression. Even if these suicides were not always openly recorded as political, the files contain clear evidence. For example, the suicide of a female teacher in 1984. The report of the education authority which blamed family problems was not entirely wrong. However, the primary cause of her suicide was that her husband had emigrated.<sup>71</sup> Her first reaction was a nervous breakdown. After her recovery she initially pledged to file for divorce but a couple of months later she applied for an exit visa for herself and her two children. Unfortunately, the authorities did not accept her private wish to reunite the family and considered the application a political provocation. She was also dismissed from her job and proceeded to take her life. Similarly, the suicide of a 14-year-old pupil in 1982 was linked to political conflicts. The boy wanted to become a teacher and appeared to be a role model as a result of his performance and allegiance to the state. As a good pupil and secretary of the Free German Youth, his career was as good as secure were there not for the somewhat conflicting worldviews of his parents. Whereas his father supported the official party line and was engaged as a speaker of the parents' committee, his mother was affiliated with the church. Accordingly, the pupil joined both the official preparation course for the 'Jugendweihe' (youth dedication) and the confirmation classes provided by the church. However, as a concession to the mother's religiosity his parents decided that the son would only take part in the religious confirmation and not in the Jugendweihe—despite the fact that his father had helped prepare the state ceremony. One can only speculate which specific discussions and conflicts developed in that situation as they were not recorded in the files. On the day of the suicide, the only conspicuous sign of internal turmoil was that the pupil behaved in school in a 'provocative manner' that was, for him, unprecedented. He criticised, for instance, the GDR's refusal to allow citizens to freely choose their place of residence.<sup>72</sup>

In both cases, the stern and hostile atmosphere of the dictatorship might have 'driven into suicide' people who were unlikely to take their life under different political circumstances. However, and this is crucial, the total number of such cases appears to be small. Western journalists considering these individual cases just as the tip of an iceberg overestimated the internal terror of the GDR society. An exaggerated politicisation of suicides, a limited

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. BLHA, Rep. 471/15.2, BdVP Potsdam, Nr. 1202.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Staatsarchiv Chemnitz, BT/RdB Karl-Marx-Stadt, Abt. Volksbildung (30413), Nr. 113414.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. BLHA, Rep. 401, BT/RdB Potsdam, Nr. 27294.

knowledge about mental disorders, and the SED's treatment of suicide as a taboo contributed to such a misperception. These factors will now be discussed in more detail.

The eagerness to exploit the high suicide rates in the GDR for propaganda purposes during the Cold War is, in retrospect, obvious. This is supported by a closer look at the way certain suicides were publicised in the West. Often, it was the interaction of West and East German actors that lead to a politically inspired simplification of the complex factors that had led to a suicide in order to level further criticism at the SED dictatorship.

In 1977, the dissident writer Reiner Kunze—who just had left the GDR for good—gave an interview to the 'Hessischer Rundfunk' radio station. On that occasion, Kunze mentioned the suicide of a young man who he believed had been interrogated and blackmailed by the Stasi. Allegedly, the young man's forced collaboration with the Stasi had led him to suicide. As his actual Stasi file documents, this was, however, not the case.<sup>73</sup> The young man had been under surveillance since 1975. After breaking from his father, who was loyal to the state, he had joined the rebellious youth in the 'Junge Gemeinde', the youth organisation of the Protestant church.<sup>74</sup> From the Stasi's perspective, the young man with his hippy attitudes appeared to be a security risk. He had hitchhiked all over the country and had talked about becoming a conscientious objector. As his housemate was an informant, the Stasi also found out that he had purloined some cans from work. Made to explain himself, he quit his job as driver and worked in a nursing home run by the church. Soon, there was an unexpected confrontation with conservative staff. He suffered from unfavourable living conditions and was unhappy in love. In this situation he applied for an exit visa but then, on the advice of a clergyman, withdraw his application.

In November 1976, the young man spent some days in Jena at the same time as the denaturalisation of the dissident singer/songwriter Wolf Biermann against which some of his friends filed a petition. In a harsh reaction, the Stasi arrested dozens of suspects. Witnessing the arrest of his friends almost literally scared the young man to death; he tried to commit suicide but was rescued. Two days later the Stasi interrogated him. That experience seriously intimidated the young man. He was afraid of being re-arrested and had vague suspicions that he was under surveillance. Nevertheless, he never suspected that his housemate had betrayed him and that two Stasi informers followed him when he moved to East Berlin in the January of 1977.

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<sup>73</sup> It is ironic that the person who put Reiner Kunze on the wrong track was Stasi informer Manfred Boehme. For Boehme's biography see Christiane Baumann, *Manfred "Ibrahim" Boehme. Das Prinzip Verrat* (Berlin: Lukas, 2015).

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Ehrhart Neubert, Thomas Auerbach, *'Es kann anders werden' Opposition und Widerstand in Thuringen 1945-1989* (Koeln: Bohrlau, 2005).

Most of the new problems he faced after his arrival in the East German capital had, however, nothing to do with the Stasi. Rather, a private quarrel thwarted his plan to get a residence permit by marrying a friend for the sake of appearances. The disillusioned 20-year-old then decided to live in a shared flat and his flatmates recommended a cemetery where he could be employed as a gardener by the church. Before that, and this is the only provable Stasi intervention, the secret police prevented him from working as film projectionist.<sup>75</sup> But this failure brought about by the Stasi behind his back was just one in a row of mishaps. It certainly did not trigger his final act of despair. Much more important was the suicide of a friend. Returning from the funeral in a depressive state, the young man slashed his wrists because he wanted to suffer in the same way as his suicidal friend. Later on, he gassed himself. The interrogations and clandestine actions of the Stasi no doubt aggravated the young man's difficulties. But his restlessness, his pessimism and his unhappy existence can't be attributed to this alone.

This example illustrates how the interaction of bereaved East Germans and the West German media contributed to a Cold War stereotype which obscured psychological factors. To what extent did those who committed suicide pursue a similar goal? According to Jean Baechler, suicides who politicised their suffering did not misrepresent it intentionally.<sup>76</sup> Rather, they projected their very private drama onto a political situation rewriting their inner thoughts and feelings as a public performance.

Examples for this kind of individual identity management are the suicides of imprisoned offenders who blamed the political system for their misery.<sup>77</sup> For example, in the autumn of 1982 an inmate of 'Bautzen I' prison set himself on fire. Before that, he tore up a sheet in half, wrote political protest slogans on each part, displayed them at the window of the cell, rubbed floor polish into his skin and pressed the alarm button. In the previous year, he had already displayed another political slogan outside of his cell welcoming the Polish Solidarnosc movement. For this protest action, he was sentenced to an additional 16 months because of 'slander against the state'. His immediate reaction was to go on hunger strike. Then he was transferred from Cottbus to Bautzen where his behaviour had been—in contrast to his lack of discipline and refusal to work in the past—unobtrusive until quite recently. Only on the day of his self-immolation did he refuse to fulfil his quota and was sent back to the cell.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. BStU, MfS, HA IX, Nr. 9989.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Jean Baechler, *Tod durch eigene Hand* (Frankfurt/Main: Ullstein, 1981), 124.

<sup>77</sup> For other examples see: Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, BdVP Dresden (MUK), Nr. 5257; BLHA, Rep. 471/15.2, BdVP Potsdam, Nr. 1260.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. BStU, MfS, BV Dresden, AP 2957/88.

After the transfer of the severely injured man to hospital where he died the next day, the Stasi searched the prison cell and found a suicide note behind a mirror. Some historians seem to believe in the authenticity of suicide notes and draw far-reaching conclusions from it.<sup>79</sup> In this case, it would be naive to take the content seriously. The fact alone that the letter cites an alleged distribution of leaflets that probably never took place highlights its illusionary character. The suicide note also adopts a very aggressive tone. The GDR is accused of Bolshevik terror and sullied as social-fascistic system. Names of West German organisations active in the Cold War such as ‘Kampfgruppe gegen Unmenschlichkeit’ or ‘Gesellschaft fuer Menschenrechte’ are mixed with all kinds of totalitarian vocabulary including ‘Kampfbuende’, ‘Fuehrer’ and ‘Endloesung’. The author even asks his compatriots to commit acts of sabotage and to assassinate members of the SED. Nevertheless, the letter was an act of political protest rather than an explanation for the suicide.

But to what extent can we attribute his suicide to political factors? Two days before the prisoner died, fellow inmates attacked him physically owing to debts that he could not or was not willing to pay back. On the morning of his suicide, two prisoners insisted that he should settle the debts immediately. A closer look at his biography further supports the assumption that the prisoner’s accusation of the political system downplayed other factors. Of course, he was a political prisoner since 1980. He had attempted to leave the country—a political crime in the GDR. However, the unusual harshness of his sentence—four years and eight months imprisonment—was a consequence of the fact that he had already been imprisoned for fraud and robbery twice. Generally, his life before 1980 looks like a sequence of professional and private failures. After failing to complete his vocational training as locksmith, he had begun to fulfil his pledge to serve in the army for ten years. Due to serious violations of discipline, the army demoted and discharged him. He got divorced, changed his job frequently and committed a series of petty crimes. Released early during an amnesty at the end of 1979, he decided to move to West Germany where he hoped to earn more money and to have more freedom. It is pointless to speculate how he would have lived after a successful escape but it is not unlikely that new kinds of conflicts would have arisen in the West as evidenced by those East Germans who moved to West Germany and then committed suicide.<sup>80</sup>

It is unknown why the prisoner was not released to the FRG as he had hoped. Since the 1960s there were clandestine ransom deals resulting in the release of 33.755 political prisoners to the

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<sup>79</sup> Cf. Christian Goeschel, “Suicides of German Jews in the Third Reich”, *German History* 25, no. 1 (2007): 22-45.

<sup>80</sup> See as examples Ursula Gaerber, Das vertane Leben des Peter H., *Schweriner Volkszeitung*, 27 May 1987; Helfried Schreiter, „Hoffentlich finde ich nun endlich Ruhe“, *Stern*, 5 November 1987; BStU, MfS, BV Potsdam, AU 1656/84, 46-53.

West.<sup>81</sup> His disappointment at being ignored was the main reason for the prisoner's political provocation. Some days before he took his life he told a fellow inmate that he would 'think of something'. His attempt to frame his own case politically made his criminal past fade and created the impression that he was a martyr. West German media presented his suicide this way without delving into his background.

The abovementioned examples corroborate observations at the macro level that tensions which arose as a result of the social order of the GDR and the dictatorial rule of the SED increased the number of potential suicides only slightly. The number of people who would have chosen not to kill themselves had the political circumstances been different was certainly small and even those suicides which can be considered to have been politically motivated were often much more complex.

An additional factor which facilitated misinterpretations was the limited knowledge about pathological aspects. In March 1977, for instance, a West Berlin newspaper quoted the fiancé of a 22-year-old nurse who had committed suicide in East Berlin. The fiancé had escaped over the border one year before and attributed his partner's suicide to the Stasi interrogations that she had endured.<sup>82</sup> After the fiancé had arrived in the FRG he had vainly tried to arrange for his partner to be smuggled across the border while she had applied for an exit visa.<sup>83</sup> Her application was, however, rejected in November 1976. This may have aggravated her mental health but it was not the direct cause of her suicide which happened four months later. The absence of an immediate trigger provoked widely differing interpretations. Her fiancé accused the political system of the GDR whereas colleagues and members of her family blamed her problematic personality. In fact, she had repeatedly suffered from depression.<sup>84</sup> Even if she had left the country-it may not have kept her alive. Nevertheless, while it is one-sided to blame only the state for her suicide, it was the dictatorship that prevented her from seeking an alternative solution to her mental anguish.

Whereas both sides in the Cold War tended to exploit inner (mental) and outer (socio-political) factors, it is a complex set of circumstances which characterises many suicides. The case of a work team leader of a concrete plant further corroborates this. This man was unexpectedly offered the chance to buy a 'Lada' car because his employer appreciated him as an exemplary and conscientious worker. Normally, consumers had to wait ten or more years to buy a car. In this context, to immediately obtain a rare and expensive 'Lada' was an

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<sup>81</sup> Ludwig A. Rehlinger, *Freikauf. Die Geschäfte der DDR mit politisch Verfolgten 1963-1989* (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, new edition 2011).

<sup>82</sup> Cf. BStU, MfS, AP 4267/78, 132.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. BStU, MfS, AP 4267/78, 22-28.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. BStU, MfS, AKK 16534/77, 98f., 137f., 141 and 148.

extraordinary privilege. Unfortunately, the man realised he could not take the opportunity to exchange his 'Trabant' for a 'Lada' due to lack of money. This triggered a nervous breakdown. He suffered from crying fit and odd delusions such as walking with Lenin through Berlin showing him heaps of dirt which were to be removed. After two months in a psychiatric hospital he came back to work but still with signs of depression. His transfer to another workplace did not ease the situation. He told colleagues that he had sold his dacha in order to improve his financial situation but regretted this decision. When a foot operation for his son was scheduled he became heavily agitated, went to a neighbour's property and slashed his wrists.<sup>85</sup> After a two weeks investigation, the detailed Stasi report revealed that the unexpected offer to get an attractive car had triggered the man's suicidal feelings but were not the deep cause. For years there had been conflicts within the family. The man was plagued with feelings of guilt regarding his mentally handicapped daughter. After his return from hospital, a number of pathological fears had also culminated in a belief that their son suffered from a malignant tumour. Although his wife assured him that the son would undergo a harmless operation, he panicked and committed suicide.

His case is one of many suicides caused or aggravated by family conflicts and mental health issues. In the light of statistical data, it can be considered representative of a substantial share of suicides. Police investigations in different parts of the GDR found relationship conflicts the main cause in 11 to 22 per cent of all cases and medical studies highlighted mental health issues as the main cause of up to 30 per cent of all suicides. In addition, most sources attributed more than a third of all suicides to serious illnesses. In contrast, several studies of the motivations for suicide in the GDR found that conflicts related to social circumstances were evident in a far lower percentage of cases. In only 5 to 10 per cent of all cases, 'fear of punishment' was considered a motivation and problems at work were recorded in only 1 to 3 per cent of all cases.<sup>86</sup>

A third factor, which helped sustain false suspicion about the correlation between the political system and suicide rates in the GDR was the dictatorship's own decision to treat both individual suicides and statistics on suicide as taboo. More often than not, the concealment of information had unintended consequences. The fact alone that investigations of suicides were considered a state secret aroused suspicions and encouraged misleading interpretations as, for example, in the case of the sudden death of the US-American singer and actor Dean Reed. The left wing artist had lived in the GDR since the 1970s and had married one of the most beautiful actresses of the GDR. In 1986, he committed suicide. The SED officially declared

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. BStU, MfS, HA IX, Nr. 4590.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Grashoff, *Selbsttötungen in der DDR*, 124.

Reed's death a 'tragic accident'. The concealment of his actual cause of death aroused suspicions of murder among friends and relatives. Western media circulated claims that the prominent singer had died after his car plunged into a lake and was found with a rope around his neck.<sup>87</sup> That graphic account was a combination of half-truths and errors, but there was no chance to get a more adequate picture of what happened as the homicide squad of the Stasi investigated the death case and kept all details secret. Like other speculations made at the time, such as that Dean Reed was an agent of Western intelligence, or that the Stasi had murdered him in order to prevent his return to the USA, rumours about his death were completely wrong. They could not, however, be debunked before the opening of the Stasi archive. The file provides clear evidence of a private conflict. After a serious argument with his wife and a first attempt to slash his wrists Reed had driven his car to a lake. Damages to the car indicated his excited mental state. A rope was found nearby indicating that he probably intended to hang himself. Instead he chose to take an overdose of drugs and plunged into the water swimming until he became unconscious and drowned. There is not the slightest hint at that any other person was involved. Also, the investigation could not detect any political influence on his decision. Reed's suicide note supports that conclusion. Although hastily written and by no means objective, the 15 page long letter highlights Reed's state of mind at death's door. Remarkably, he reinforces his unshakeable belief in communism—as if he had apprehended the erroneous suspicions his death would arouse. Apart from that, the letter is mainly an extended criticism of his wife.<sup>88</sup>

25 years earlier, the tabooing of an East German army general's suicide provoked similar suspicions. General Vinzenz Mueller died of self-defenestration on the 12 May 1961. In order to maintain a pretence of normality, he was buried with a state funeral. This could not prevent West Berlin media from claiming that officers of the East German police and the Stasi had driven him to suicide. According to an eyewitness account that was publicised in the West, a prison transport vehicle had driven up in front of the retired general's house. Shortly thereafter several officers had entered the house and Mueller had jumped out of the window. The details of the report were close to the actual run of events but the whole interpretation was erroneous.

Mueller was one of the few high-ranking Wehrmacht officers who had joined the communists during his time as a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union. In the GDR, he became Chief of Staff of the National People's Army and deputy minister of defence. As part of the general

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. Peter Michalski, "US-Popstar von 'DDR'-Geheimdienst ertraenkt", *BILD*, 24 June 1986.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. BStU, MfS, AP 2278/92, vol. 1; BStU, MfS, AU 12332/86, vol. 1, 20, 29, 114-129; Gunther Geserick, Klaus Vendura, Ingo Wirth, *Zeitzeuge Tod* (Leipzig: Militzke, 2003), 205-215.



policy of the SED to get rid of the Nazi experts after the foundation and consolidation of the army, Mueller was retired in 1958. Subsequently, he was no longer invited to state ceremonies, and was even kept under surveillance. However, his permanent fear of arrest was unjustified. His persecution mania was at least partly a result of private conflicts. Mueller's wife had committed suicide and he had an uneasy conscience because of his liaison with a young woman. In order to escape the embarrassing situation, the retired general prepared to leave the GDR at the beginning of 1961. At the very last moment he cancelled this plan due to revelations in a West German newspaper that he had been involved in mass shootings during World War Two. As his situation appeared to be precarious in both German states now, Mueller developed signs of ill health and was hospitalised for 12 weeks. Back home, on the day of his suicide, a black ambulance arrived to bring him to the psychiatric ward of the hospital for government officials. Mueller's children had arranged that transport under the pretence that he would receive 'treatment for the kidneys'. Presumably, Mueller was suspicious and misinterpreted the situation (which appeared even more threatening due to the additional presence of a fire engine) as the moment of arrest he was scared of.<sup>89</sup>

The SED had good reasons for silencing this suicide. A leading military expert allegedly involved in war crimes was the last thing the GDR needed in its ideological battle for recognition as a true 'anti-fascist state'. Once again, however, the concealment did not work smoothly. In the long run, constant denial and the distribution of false information backfired and revived the Cold War image of a dictatorship which frequently drove its citizens to suicide.

In the West, there was a certain eagerness to attribute suicides to political conflicts even if no reliable information was available.<sup>90</sup> For the sake of political expedience long-term cultural factors as well as pathological factors were absconded. In the East, the treatment of suicide as a political taboo characterised by censorship, conjecture and rumour also unintentionally exacerbated the tendency for suicides in the GDR to become politicised.

## Summary

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. Peter Joachim Lapp, *General bei Hitler und Ulbricht. Vinzenz Mueller–Eine deutsche Karriere* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2003).

<sup>90</sup> Examples abound and don't need to be discussed in more detail here. For instance Rainer Hildebrandt, "Grausame Schicksale in den Strafanstalten der 'DDR'", *Tagesspiegel*, 25 Aug. 1956; Henk Ohnesorge, "Wollte Pfarrer Guenther in die Bundesrepublik?", *Die Welt*, 21 Sept. 1978; Franz-Josef Rickert, "Selbstmord: Jacob-Sisters trauern um ihren Pfarrer", *BILD am Sonntag*, 24 Sept. 1978; "Selbstverbrennung aus Verzweiflung", *Berliner Morgenpost*, 27 Aug. 1986.

The Cold War stereotype of a suicidogenic totalitarian regime persisted in public discourse for decades. Academic debates had only little impact. Partly, the SED regime fuelled suspicions by making the topic a political taboo. Partly, the bereaved and the victims themselves framed suicides politically and provided Western media with the stories they were looking for. However, whereas political repression is clearly an important factor in some individual cases, it was not the reason for the high frequency of suicides in the GDR. Contrary to superficial statistical surveys and anecdotal evidence, political conflicts played only a marginal role.

Both statistical data and individual case studies strongly support this conclusion. The dictatorship had no substantial influence on the rates of suicide in several sub-levels of the GDR society which were the most likely to be affected by repression such as prisons and the army. Generally, the communist regime did not increase the number of people who committed suicide significantly. Even during the forced collectivisation campaign in 1960 when dozens of farmers committed suicide, the effect on the overall rate was barely detectable.

In order to understand East Germany's high suicide rates, one has to acknowledge long-term differences between East and West Germany which can be associated with regional patterns of behaviour. Factors such as religious denomination, mentality and divorce are much more important than political repression or other social factors. Moreover, the fact that the socialist society failed to bring suicide rates down, despite full employment, low crime rates and comprehensive social care, highlights the limited penetration of society even in a state with totalitarian aspirations.

The Western misperception of suicide in East Germany did not vanish with the end of the GDR in 1990. After the fall of the Wall, it was tempting to interpret the drop of suicide rates as a success of liberalisation and democratisation. All the more as suicide rates are almost at the level in the eastern and western parts of Germany at present. But the rapid fall of East German suicide rates after 1990 was hardly a success of reunification.<sup>91</sup> A close look at the statistics debunks the enticing idea that freedom prevents suicide. A generational breakdown of the figures reveals a creeping convergence of suicide rates that began a long time ago. Whereas the recorded suicides of elderly people differed widely in the GDR and the FRG, those generations born after 1949 showed almost no difference to their West German contemporaries regarding suicide. For decades, this fundamental change remained hidden in the statistics which were dominated by suicides of the elderly. The downtrend started to

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<sup>91</sup> See for example Thomas Bulmahn, "Modernity and Happiness", *Journal of Happiness Studies* 1 (2000): 375-400.

become visible only during the 1980s when those age groups with lower suicide rates gained more and more influence on the overall rate.

It is ironic that restrictions on research prevented the communist leaders from becoming aware of let alone understanding the positive trend. At the same time, the anti-communist spectre that haunted the West blurred its vision, too. Only by dispensing with both the communist regime's taboos and the unjustified accusations levelled by western critics, can another conundrum be revealed: The remarkable decrease in suicide rates in East and West Germany after 1990 which has not yet been completely understood but can at least be finally recognized.